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ABSTRACT

Written in response to a resolution passed at the 1974 convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, these guidelines are based on the assumption that the sexist usage of language aids in arbitrary assignation of roles to both men and women and would be better omitted. Although directed specifically to editors, these guidelines for eliminating sexist language can be useful to all educators who help shape the language patterns and language usage of students and thus can help promote language that opens rather than closes possibilities to women and men. The following general problems in using nonsexist language are discussed, examples are given, and alternatives are suggested: (1) the omission of women as in "the common man" and "businessman" and in the use of the masculine pronoun for the generic singular and indefinite pronoun; (2) the demeaning of women by not treating men and women in a parallel manner and using patronizing or trivializing terms; and (3) sex-role stereotyping such as appears in the sentence "Have your mother send cookies for the field trip." Specific problems of female representation in books or collections of articles discussing professional issues, booklists, teaching units, research, reference books, and journal articles are discussed. (MKM)

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Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications

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Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications

Introduction

"Sexism" may be defined as words or actions that arbitrarily assign roles or characteristics to people on the basis of sex. Originally used to refer to practices that discriminated against women, the term now includes any usage that unfairly delimits the aspirations or attributes of either sex. Neither men nor women can reach their full potential when men are conditioned to be only aggressive, analytical, and active and women are conditioned to be only submissive, emotional, and passive. The man who cannot cry and the woman who cannot command are equally victims of their socialization.

Language plays a central role in socialization, for it helps teach children the roles that are expected of them. Through language, children conceptualize their ideas and feelings about themselves and their world. Thought and action are reflected in words, and words in turn condition how a person thinks and acts. Eliminating sexist language will not eliminate sexist conduct, but as the language is liberated from sexist usages and assumptions, women and men will begin to share more equal, active, caring roles.

Recognizing these problems, members of the National Council of Teachers of English passed a resolution at their 1974 convention directing the Council to create guidelines ensuring the use of nonsexist language in NCTE publications and correspondence. Although directed specifically to NCTE editors, authors, and staff, the guidelines will also benefit members at large. Whether teaching in the classroom, assigning texts, determining curriculum, or serving on national committees, NCTE members directly and indirectly influence the socialization of children. They help shape the language patterns and usage of students and thus have potential for promoting language that opens rather than closes possibilities to women and men.

These guidelines are not comprehensive. They identify sexist usages that plague communication and discuss specific problems that NCTE encounters in its role as an educational publisher. The guidelines do not offer a new dogmatism. Detailed and vigorous arguments continue over many of these language patterns. These debates have not been resolved; rather, an attempt has been made to identify usages that concerned men and women find objectionable and to propose alternatives.

General Problems

Omission of Women

1. Although *man* in its original sense carried the dual meaning of adult human and adult male, its meaning has come to be so closely identified with adult male that the generic use of *man* and other words with masculine markers should be avoided whenever possible.

Examples	*Alternatives*
mankind	humanity, human beings, people
man's achievements	human achievements
the best man for the job	the best person for the job, the best man or woman for the job
man-made	synthetic, manufactured, crafted, machine-made
the common man	the average person, ordinary people

2. The use of *man* in occupational terms when persons holding the jobs could be either female or male should be avoided. English is such a rich language that alternatives to the much maligned ___ -person (as in *congressperson*) can almost always be found (*representative*).

Examples	*Alternatives*
chairman	coordinator (of a committee or department), moderator (of a meeting), presiding officer, head, chair
businessman, fireman, mailman	business executive or manager, fire fighter, mail carrier

In the interest of parallel treatment, job titles for women and men should be the same.

Examples	*Alternatives*
steward and stewardess	flight attendant
policeman and policewoman	police officer

3. Because English has no generic singular—or common-sex—pronoun, we have used *he, his,* and *him* in such expressions as "the student . . . he." When we constantly personify "the judge," "the critic," "the executive," "the author," etc., as male by using the pronoun *he*, we are subtly conditioning ourselves against the idea of a female judge, critic, executive, or author. There are several alternative approaches for ending the exclusion of women that results from the pervasive use of the masculine pronouns.

   a. Recast into the plural.

Example	*Alternative*
Give each student his paper as soon as he is finished.	Give students their papers as soon as they are finished.

b. Reword to eliminate unnecessary gender problems.

Example	*Alternative*
The average student is worried about his grades.	The average student is worried about grades.

c. Replace the masculine pronoun with *one*, *you*, or (sparingly) *he or she*, as appropriate.

Example	*Alternative*
If the student was satisfied with his performance on the pretest, he took the posttest.	A student who was satisfied with her or his performance on the pretest took the posttest.

d. Alternate male and female examples and expressions.

Example	*Alternative*
Let each student participate. Has he had a chance to talk? Could he feel left out?	Let each student participate. Has she had a chance to talk? Could he feel left out?

4. Using the masculine pronouns to refer to an indefinite pronoun (*everybody, everyone, anybody, anyone*) also has the effect of excluding women. In all but strictly formal usage, plural pronouns have become acceptable substitutes for the masculine singular.

Example	*Alternative*
Anyone who wants to go to the game should bring his money tomorrow.	Anyone who wants to go to the game should bring their money tomorrow.

5. Certain phrases inadvertently exclude women by assuming that all readers are men.

Example	*Alternative*
NCTE convention-goers and their wives are invited . . .	NCTE convention-goers and their spouses are invited . . .

Demeaning Women

1. Men and women should be treated in a parallel manner, whether the description involves jobs, appearance, marital status, or titles.

Examples	*Alternatives*
lady lawyer	lawyer
Running for Student Council president are Bill Smith, a straight-A sophomore, and Kathie Ryan, a pert junior.	Running for Student Council president are Bill Smith, a straight-A sophomore, and newspaper editor Kathie Ryan, a junior.
Senator Percy and Mrs. Chisholm	Charles Percy and Shirley Chisholm or Mr. Percy and Mrs. Chisholm or Senator Percy and Representative Chisholm

2. Terms or adjectives which patronize or trivialize women or girls should be avoided, as should sexist suffixes and adjectives dependent on stereotyped masculine or feminine markers.

Examples	*Alternatives*
gal Friday	assistant
I'll have my girl do it.	I'll have my secretary do it.
career girl	professional woman, name the woman's profession, e.g., attorney Ellen Smith
ladies	women (unless used with gentlemen)
libber	feminist
coed	student
authoress, poetess	author, poet
man-sized job	big or enormous job
old wives' tale	superstitious belief, story, or idea

Sex-Role Stereotyping

1. Women should be shown as participating equally with men; they should not be omitted or treated as subordinate to men. Thus generic terms such as doctor or nurse should be assumed to include both men and women; "male nurse" and "woman doctor" should be avoided.

Examples	*Alternatives*
Writers become so involved in their work that they neglect their wives and children.	Writers become so involved in their work that they neglect their families.
Sally's husband lets her teach part-time.	Sally teaches part-time.

2. Jobs, roles, or personal characteristics should not be stereotyped by sex.

Examples	*Alternatives*
the elementary teacher . . . she	elementary teachers . . . they
the principal . . . he	principals . . . they
Have your Mother send cookies for the field trip.	Have your parents send cookies for the field trip.
Write a paragraph about what you expect to do when you are old enough to have Mr. or Mrs. before your name.	Write a paragraph about what you expect to do when you grow up.
(spelling exercise) While lunch was delayed, the ladies chattered about last night's meeting.	While lunch was delayed, the women talked about last night's meeting.

Sample Revised Passages

Many of the general problems just discussed overlap in practice. Substantial revisions are sometimes necessary:

Example

O'Connors to Head PTA

Jackson High School PTA members elected officers for the 1975-76 school year Wednesday night at the school cafeteria.

Dr. and Mrs. James O'Connor were elected co-presidents from a slate of three couples. Dr. O'Connor, a neurosurgeon on the staff of Howard Hospital, has served for two years on the PTA Budget and Finance Committee. Mrs. O'Connor has been active on the Health and Safety Committee.

Elected as co-vice-presidents were Mr. and Mrs. Tom Severns; secretary, Mrs. John Travers; and treasurer, Mrs. Edward Johnson. Committee chairmen were also selected. Each chairman will be briefed on his responsibilities at a special meeting on June 3. The revised budget will be presented at that meeting.

Principal Dick Wade announced that Mrs. Elizabeth Sullivan had been chosen Teacher of the Year by the Junior Women's League. She was nominated in a letter written by ten of her students. Each student discussed how she had influenced him.

Mrs. Sullivan, an English teacher at Jackson for ten years, is the wife of Joseph Sullivan, a partner in the law firm of Parker, Sullivan and Jordon, and the mother of two Jackson students.

Smartly attired in a blue tweed suit, Mrs. Sullivan briefly addressed the group, expressing her gratitude at receiving the award.

Alternative

O'Connors to Head PTA

Jackson High School PTA members elected officers for the 1975-76 school year Wednesday night at the school cafeteria.

James and Marilyn O'Connor were elected co-presidents from a slate of three couples. James O'Connor, a neurosurgeon on the staff of Howard Hospital, has served for two years on the PTA Budget and Finance Committee, and Marilyn O'Connor, president of the League of Women Voters, has been active on the PTA Health and Safety Committee for three years.

Elected as co-vice-presidents were Jane and Tom Severns; secretary, Ann Travers; and treasurer, Susan Johnson. Committee coordinators were also selected and will be briefed on their responsibilities at a special meeting on June 3. The revised budget will be presented at that meeting.

Dick Wade, principal of Jackson High School, announced that Elizabeth Sullivan, an English teacher at Jackson for ten years, had been chosen Teacher of the Year by the Junior Women's League. She was nominated in a letter written by ten of her students. Each of the students discussed how they had been influenced by her.

Sullivan briefly addressed the group, expressing her pleasure at receiving the award.

Specific Problems

The under-representation of female writers and scholars in many fields has been variously attributed to systematic neglect of women or to the broader social conditions which have discouraged women from pursuing professional careers. This neglect of women has no relation to their competence; research shows people rate a work more highly when it is attributed to a male author than when it is attributed to a female author. Quality need not be sacrificed in urging that an honest attempt be made to represent female as well as male writers and scholars.

Books or Collections of Articles Discussing Professional Issues

1. Authors of monographs and editors of collections should use and encourage the use of nonsexist language. Readers will be aware that language cannot be altered when articles are reprinted from another publication.

2. Sexist language in a direct quotation cannot be altered, but other alternatives should be considered.

   a. Avoid the quotation altogether if it is not really necessary.

   b. Paraphrase the quotation, giving the original author credit for the idea.

   c. If the quotation is fairly short, recast as an indirect quotation, eliminating the sexist language.

Example	*Alternative*
Among the questions asked by the school representatives were several about curriculum areas, including the following question: "Considering the ideal college graduate, what degree of knowledge would you prefer him to have in the following curricular areas for an executive position: . . .?"	Among the questions asked by the school representatives were several about curriculum areas, including a question asking what degree of knowledge the ideal college graduate should have in the following curricular areas to obtain an executive position: . . .

Booklists

1 A committee choosing items for a booklist should seek books that emphasize the equality of men and women and show them in nontraditional as well as traditional roles. Children's favorites may contain sexist elements; these books may be included provided the annotations reflect awareness of the sexist elements.

Example	*Alternative*
More than anything, sixteen-year-old Sandy wants to date Joe Collins, captain of the tennis team. Sandy's interest in pets now seems childish and her friends boring. The schemes she contrives to attract Joe's attention make for delightful reading.	More than anything, sixteen-year-old Sandy Draper wants to date Joe Collins, captain of the tennis team. A determined Sandy gives up her interest in pets and neglects her friends as she tries to attract a shy Joe. Readers can decide for themselves whether Sandy's actions are realistic.

If this is impractical, the introduction or preface should explain why some of the books were chosen despite their sexist elements. The committee should encourage teachers to review books for classroom use; if the books reflect sexist attitudes, teachers should discuss these attitudes and the changing roles of women and men.

When selecting picture books, the committee should also be careful that the illustrations show males and females actively participating in a variety of situations at home, work, and play.

2. Careful consideration should be given to the organization of booklists. Books should not be categorized by traditional male and female interests. Special efforts should be made to include books that portray males and females in nontraditional roles.

3. All annotations in the booklist should be cast in nonsexist language.

Examples	*Alternatives*
Through the discovery of new cave paintings in southern France, the author reconstructs the life of prehistoric man and shows him as a person remarkably similar in feelings and emotions to man today.	Through the discovery of new cave paintings in southern France, the author reconstructs the life of prehistoric men and women and shows them as people remarkably similar in feelings and emotions to people today.
Forceful analysis of the black's image of himself and the present state of the black revolution.	Forceful analysis of the black's self-image and the present state of the black revolution.
Amy is certain that she is going to be a nurse when she grows up, but a sudden case of tonsillitis and her subsequent encounter with a lady doctor change her mind.	Amy is certain that she is going to be a nurse when she grows up, but when a sudden case of tonsillitis leads to her encounter with Dr. Jane Gilmore, Amy changes her mind.

Teaching Units

Giving careful thought to the topic of a unit, its organization, and the examples and questions to be used will help prevent sexist treatment. For example,

Fiction and poetry units should include materials by and about both women and men. If an obviously sexist piece is included, the discussion questions should bring out this fact.

A unit on classics should be accompanied by questions that promote discussion of the treatment of women and why their image differs from that of men.

Activities should not be segregated by sex; e.g., girls may build stage sets, boys may sew costumes.

Units on usage and spelling should include examples that promote nontraditional views of male and female roles.

Examples	*Alternatives*
Jill *carefully* stitched the hem in her new dress.	Jill balanced *carefully* as she reached for the next branch of the old tree.
Eddie *quietly* crept up the back stairs.	Eddie *quietly* cradled the sick kitten.
After passing the exam, the steel mill made Tom an apprentice rigger. (misplaced modifier)	After graduating from college, Macpherson and Associates hired Nancy as an apprentice architect. (misplaced modifier)

Research

1. Careful consideration should be given to the methodology and content of research to ensure that it carries no sexist implications. (This does not deny the legitimacy of research designed, for example, to study sex differences in the performance of certain skills. Researchers are encouraged to consult the American Psychological Association *Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language* listed in the bibliography.)

2. The sample population should be carefully defined. If both males and females are included, references to individual subjects in the report of the research should not assume that they are male only.

3. The examples used for case studies should be balanced in numbers of male and female subjects if both sexes were involved in the study.

Reference Books (Bibliographies, Indexes, Style Manuals, Teacher's Guides)

Reference books can be implicitly sexist through their organization and content—what is left out can be as telling as what is included. If the subject has been studied primarily by men, a special attempt should be made to discover whether women have also made significant contributions.

Journal Articles

1. Articles which contain sexist language but are otherwise acceptable for publication should be returned to the author with a letter of explanation, perhaps encouraging the author to rewrite the article and suggesting that she or he consult these *Guidelines.* Alternately, the editor may choose to edit such articles to eliminate sexist language.

2. Instructions to prospective authors in the front matter of the journal should include a notice to the effect that

   > In keeping with the *Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications,* the editor reserves the right to edit all articles which contain sexist language.

Conclusion

Important as language is, improving it is to little purpose if underlying assumptions and traditional omissions continue. The Committee on the Role and Image of Women in the Council and the Profession works to ensure equal treatment of women and girls as students, teachers, administrators, and Council staff. If women never enter the author's world, it little avails a journal or book editor to scrupulously eliminate "man . . . he" references. However, when authors or editors do find it necessary to use selections that contain sexist language or sexist attitudes, the attitudes should be discussed in the introduction, in a headnote, or in some other appropriate place.

The dramatic changes in language now taking place pose a special challenge to NCTE members and staff. Whether the members work as teachers, authors, or editors, they not only help shape students' language patterns but are also viewed by the public as custodians of what is "correct" in the language. The very newness of these changes in our language offers English teachers a unique opportunity. Under their guidance, eliminating sexism can bring a new vitality to the English language.

References

Authors and editors who would like to see further examples of sexist language and suggestions for how to cope with them should refer to these publications, sources of many items in the NCTE *Guidelines*.

Guidelines for Creating Positive Sexual and Racial Images in Educational Materials. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1975. (Available from the publisher, 866 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022.)

Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972. [Available from the publisher, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Reprinted in *Elementary English* 52 (May 1975): 725-733.]

Guidelines for Improving the Image of Women in Textbooks. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972. (Available from the publisher, 1900 East Lake Avenue, Glenview, Illinois 60025.)

Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language. Prepared by the American Psychological Association Task Force on Issues of Sexual Bias in Graduate Education. *American Psychologist* (June 1975): 682-684.

Guidelines for the Development of Elementary and Secondary Instructional Materials. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston School Department, 1975. (Available from the publisher, 383 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10017.)

"'He' Is Not 'She.'" Los Angeles, Calif.: Westside Women's Committee. (Available from the publisher, P.O. Box 24020, Village Station, Los Angeles, California 90024.)